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ABSTRACT

Defining self-concept as all the perceptions individuals have of themselves, this booklet examines research-based thinking concerning the relationships that exist between reading and self-concept and describes practical applications of these relationships so that teachers can use them in the classroom to improve self-concepts as well as reading abilities. The booklet's first chapter defines good, poor, and reading self-concepts, and the second examines those aspects of self-concept development that have been established, such as the influence of significant others, age, counteractions, self-concept consistency, and the spiraling process. The third chapter explores two common types of measures, paper and pencil tests and informal observations, used to diagnose the various behaviors associated with self-concept. The fourth chapter outlines techniques for developing a classroom atmosphere conducive to developing positive self-concepts, and the last offers suggestions for improving children's self-concepts through the use of voluntary oral reading. An appendix lists several self-concept measures. (FL)

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self-concept and reading

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1984

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FOREWORD

This second edition of *Self-Concept and Reading* focuses attention on readers' feelings about their competency in reading. The current emphasis on minimum levels of performance and on reading skills that can be measured makes the publication especially well timed. We need to be reminded of the importance of self-concept in reading achievement.

Quandt and Selznick, in this publication, do an excellent job of suggesting practices that teachers may use to enhance students' self-concepts. Their suggestions are clearly presented and can be adapted easily for use in most classrooms. The emphasis, as it should be, is upon helping poor readers to improve how they view themselves in relation to reading.

The confidence learners have in their ability to learn is an important but sometimes neglected aspect of reading achievement. Certainly, many factors in addition to self-concept are involved in student learning. Among the most important of these factors are prior knowledge, student attitude toward learning and school, quality of instruction, and amount of instruction. Still, self-concept is among the most important influences upon learning.

Most of the content of the first edition has been retained in this second edition. The first edition, published in 1972, was jointly sponsored by the International Reading Association and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading. In this edition, references related to the topic have been updated.

Since all teachers are—or should be—concerned about their students' self-concepts, this publication should have wide appeal. Though the manuscript cites examples frequently that appear to be in a setting in which a language experience approach is being used, most ideas presented would be applicable regardless of the approach or approaches a teacher may be using. Some of the practices and techniques suggested would not be applicable in all settings: prudent teachers will select those most appropriate for use in the settings in which they teach.

Ira E. Aaron, *President*
International Reading Association
1983-1984

INTRODUCTION

After studying the existing research dealing with self-concept and school achievement, William W. Purkey made the comment:

> For generations, wise teachers have sensed the significant and positive relationships between a student's concept of himself and his performance in school. They believed that the students who feel good about themselves and their abilities are the ones who are most likely to succeed. (1970, p. 14)

While there is no indication of how many of these wise teachers exist, there is little question of the truth in Purkey's statement.

Yet, as wise teachers survey the programs and materials in reading available today, they are able to find little that helps them make students feel good about themselves and their abilities. With a few notable exceptions, the emphasis that teaching materials have given to reading skills, sequence, and objectives has forced self-concept into the background. As a result, teachers who sense a relationship between students' self-concept and reading performance find it difficult or impossible to locate information on the nature of that relationship or methods of improving the concepts students have of themselves as readers.

The material that follows was written in an attempt to fill that void. The information provided is intended to help those teachers of reading who wish to combat reading difficulties through the building of self-concepts.

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OF READING AND SELF-CONCEPT

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, the relationships that exist between reading and self-concept are explored through the examination of research-based current thinking regarding these relationships. Second, practical applications of these relationships are described so that an elementary teacher can use them in the classroom to improve self-concepts as well as reading abilities.

Definitions

Before exploring approaches to the improvement of self-concept, some agreement must be reached regarding its nature. Although a variety of definitions is given, in this paper the term "self-concept" refers to all the perceptions individuals have of themselves; especially emphasized are individuals' perceptions of their value and ability.

There are two aspects of self-concept about which most psychologists appear to agree:

1. The perceptions of self that individuals have include their views of themselves as compared to others (self-perception); their views of how others see them (self-other perception); and their views of how they wish they could be (self-ideal).
2. The perceptions of self that individuals have are largely based on the experiences they have had with those people who are important to them (significant others). Thus, such people can effect change in individuals' self-concept.

Good Self-Concepts

Good (positive) self-concepts are ones in which individuals perceive themselves as capable and/or important and, therefore, able to perform at normal or superior levels. In terms of reading, this is a set of self-perceptions that in no way interferes with reading ability or with ability to learn to read. It may, in fact, enhance the person's opportunities to learn to read well.

Poor Self-Concepts

Poor (negative) self-concepts, on the other hand, are ones in which individuals perceive themselves as incapable or unimportant to

such an extent that they are unable to perform at normal levels. Related specifically to reading, this is a set of perceptions that intereferes with reading ability or with the ability to learn to read.

Reading Self-Concepts

In addition to a global self-concept—the total of all perceptions individuals have of themselves—children appear to have subcategories of self-concept (Chapman & Boersma, 1979). As students they have concepts of themselves which, in turn, are composed of several self-concept subroles. Those perceptions which are related specifically to reading can be termed **reading self-concept**.

READING ABILITY AND THE PROCESS OF SELF-CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

Correlates of Self-Concept

If the direct and specific causes of self-concept (good or poor) could be identified, the task of improving self-concepts certainly would be simplified. To date, however, no research has been successful in isolating such causes. This fact should be no great surprise since causes of behaviors and of perceptions are difficult, if not impossible, to identify. However, studies of correlation, comparison, and predictability have provided enough consistent, positive evidence that tentative assumptions can be developed.

Studies that have correlated levels of reading achievement with levels of self-concept indicate that a positive association exists between the two. Studies of comparison have found significant differences in self-concept scores between high achieving and low achieving readers with the former receiving higher self-concept scores. Some validity has also been found for using global self-concept prior to reading instruction as a predictor of reading success in later grades.

The aspects of self-concept development that have been fairly well established are discussed below.

Influence of Significant Others

Self-concepts of individuals are developed as a result of the experiences they have had. Maehr (1969) suggests that children's reactions to experiences are based more on views that people important to them appear to hold of them than upon children's success or failure with a task itself. The views that these people appear to hold are revealed through their reactions to children's behaviors, through their approval or disapproval, acceptance or nonacceptance, love or lack of love, and through other rewards or punishments. From a very early age, children learn two concepts from such reactions: how competent they are in activities which are deemed important by people significant to them and how valuable they are as individuals. Thus, if the people important to the children (especially parents in preschool years) regard a skill or behavior as important but teach children, through reactions, that they are incompetent in that skill or behavior, negative self-concepts are formed. Children can learn to expect competency or incompetency in a skill—even before their first trial with it—if so instructed.

Age

Another important aspect of the child's self-concept development is the impact of age. Many children, from the preschool years to first grade possess very positive self-concepts, regardless of their achievement or ability levels (Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978). Such young children have not internalized the importance of school achievement and do not tend to devalue their self-concepts if they are unsuccessful in school. Third grade is a common time for children to begin to lower their self-concepts as a result of learning problems. Preadolescents with learning problems, on the other hand, appear to be most susceptible to the impact of their failures (Bingham, 1980).

Counteractions

When individuals feel that those people who are significant regard them as incompetent, they attempt to counteract this appraisal. In their quest for feelings of overall importance, children have only four alternatives regarding any competency even though they may not be conscious of them. Children may actually feel competent in those activities which are important. They may hide or disguise their lack of ability, deny the importance of the activities, or make it clear that they have extended no effort. To publicly admit that one has made every effort with important activities and then failed is out of the question.

With the current emphasis that society places on reading ability, most children today grow up in an environment in which inability to read is socially unacceptable. So denying the importance of reading ability is difficult. For most children who are blocked from feeling competent in reading, often only two alternatives are available: disguising incompetency or withdrawing effort. Few children are clever enough to hide or disguise from both teachers and peers something as obvious as reading disability. Many children are forced into a position where they must give the appearance that effort has not been extended. Thus, to avoid having their reading self-concepts lowered even more, children may exhibit behaviors similar to the following: showing apparent disinterest in reading, showing apparent lack of effort to learn to read, refusing to read assigned material, and/or showing apparent carelessness or professed hatred of reading. These behaviors are not always caused by poor self-concepts but are a common outgrowth of such self-attitudes.

Self-Concept Consistency

Self-concepts tend to remain consistent. If children who regard themselves as unathletic one day hit a home run during a baseball game,

they are not likely to suddenly regard themselves as athletes. They are more likely to attribute their success to luck. Once self-concepts have been formed, individuals usually behave in a manner that will evoke the type of treatment or response to which they have adjusted (Lecky, 1945; Rogers, 1951). Children are comfortable, moreover, with such anticipated responses because they tend to reinforce and give consistency to self-concept.

Children who come to school believing they will not succeed in reading, as well as children who gain this concept at a later time, may become victims of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Believing that they will not succeed in reading, their behaviors and efforts during reading instruction contribute to making their expectations come true.

The Spiraling Process

Not only does self-concept interfere with learning to read but the resulting reading disability leads to an even poorer self-concept. Thus, an entire spiral of cycles with reading disability and self-concept continually reinforcing one another is possible.

In addition, some children who have a weakness in a particular area may generalize their feeling about this to other facets of the school situation (Chapman & Boersma, 1979). In this way, perceptions such as a specific reading self-concept may extend to the global view of self.

Contrarily, if successful in extracting ideas from the printed page and if the people important to them enable the children to recognize their success, they will develop concepts of themselves as "readers." As a result of such successes, children will attempt more difficult material, take more pleasure in reading, and be apt to read more widely. The wide reading makes children better readers. As children recognize their improvement and as people important to them notice, children's concepts of themselves as readers are enhanced, and the cycle continues.

Artley (1977) suggests that many remedial reading programs do not succeed because they fail to recognize the importance of overcoming damaged self-concepts through consistent, successful, and rewarding reading experiences. The role of self-concept in learning to read or in improving reading skill is very important and may continue to grow in importance if nothing is done to reverse its effects. Thus such reading programs fail to break the negative spiraling process described.

DIAGNOSING SELF-CONCEPTS

In order to meet individual needs it is important to know which children can profit the most from instruction geared toward improving self-concepts. Such a classification is possible only when you, the teacher, are able to recognize which of the children assessed as poor readers also have poor self-concepts. Careful diagnosis is necessary.

Diagnosis of self-concept, however, like many types of evaluation, offers some difficulties. Self-concept is a construct, not a behavior. It produces a great number of behaviors, but no pattern of behaviors has been found that is consistent across all individuals. Although precise validity is nearly impossible to establish for any measure of self-concept, there are several categories of behaviors which provide strong clues for diagnosis. There are two common types of measures to diagnose the various behaviors associated with self-concept: paper and pencil tests and informal observations.

Tests

Various paper and pencil self-concept tests have been developed. Many of these tests can appropriately be used by classroom teachers and can be interpreted without the aid of a psychologist. A list of some of these instruments is included in the appendix.

Most paper and pencil tests are limited by the fact that they are "self-report" measures. In other words, children are asked to determine or evaluate their own perceptions of themselves in response to a statement or question on a test paper. For example, children may be asked to select one of several adjectives that best describes their feelings or indicate which items in a list of descriptors apply to them. The difficulty with such procedures is that one cannot determine with what insight and with what honesty children can or will attack such a task. Also, such tests may overemphasize the overall score that is derived and not pay sufficient attention to the qualitative aspects of children's responses, which are often more revealing of self-concept (Schlesinger, 1982). The few commercial tests which are designed to measure self-concept through means other than self-report must be individually administered, usually by experts who have been trained in test administration.

Informal Observations

Observations of individuals on a nonstandardized basis, although overcoming the objections to self-report measures, pose a different type of objectivity problem. We are all prone to see what we expect to see rather than what is there. Once a teacher has decided that a child's problem is self-concept, evidence can be found to support the decision regardless of its accuracy. The solution to this problem is to delay conclusions about a child until a number of objective observations have been made. The observations can be recorded on a simple check list which allows space for written comments. In some cases, an outside observer may be needed as well. A school psychologist is in a good position to observe a child in and out of a classroom.

Five types of behavior which give an indication of self-concept are ordinarily observable in a school setting.

Comments

Observe the comments children make either about themselves or about reading. Negative comments about themselves as individuals reveal poor global self-concepts. Negative comments about their ability to read or about reading lessons reveal poor reading self-concepts. Of course, the comments need to be repetitive, consistent, and sincere before they are valid indicators of the youngsters' self-concepts.

Reactions

Observe other reactions to reading instruction and reading tasks. While children use a variety of behaviors to demonstrate their feelings, through daily interaction a teacher learns to associate the behaviors of each individual with appropriate feelings. Facial expressions, body movements, gestures, groans, and similar noises can all indicate lack of interest in reading. Lack of interest can be due to the low motivation that accompanies poor teaching, but it can also indicate low self-concept. The degree to which the other children in the classroom dislike reading should give some clues about which cause to suspect.

Interactions

Observe children's interactions with their peers. The actions of children toward their peers and of the other children toward them give some indication of their self-concepts. If some children either attempt to

avoid playing or working with others or engage in attention-getting devices, some evidence is present that they suffer from poor self-concepts. If their peers consistently ridicule or shun them, it is likely that the children have developed such perceptions.

The same types of interactions can be observed during reading instructional periods. If children substitute attention-getting devices for participation in the instruction or if peers ridicule their reading ability, reading self-concepts are likely to be poor.

Volunteer Answers

Observe the extent to which children volunteer to answer questions raised during class discussion. When children seldom if ever volunteer, a number of factors could be the cause. If children seldom volunteer in any academic area but demonstrate general knowledge and interest when called upon anyway, poor global self-concept is a likely cause. If this set of behaviors is limited to reading instruction periods, poor reading self-concept is a likely cause.

Volunteer answers of another type also must be observed. Some children volunteer often during class discussions but seldom have pertinent answers or comments. Children in this category could be attempting to disguise their lack of competency, as discussed earlier. This set of behaviors, therefore, could also be a clue to poor self-concept.

Confidence

Observe the confidence with which children make decisions. Perhaps the best indication of this confidence is a measure of the extent to which children ask questions about the tasks you assign. An extreme in either direction can be informative. If children constantly ask questions about the progress of their work, this action can be a sign of the insecurity that accompanies poor self-concept. On the other hand, if children never ask questions, this behavior can also indicate insecurity.

Diagnosis Summary

No single criteria is likely to be adequate in diagnosing self-concept. Many of the behaviors described could be attributed to other causes. If a number of the negative behaviors, however, are consistently present in a child, one should be able to conclude with some confidence that the child's reading problems are related to poor self-concepts.

BUILDING POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPTS

Developing a Positive Classroom Atmosphere

Together with the home and social groups, the school classroom contributes largely to the shaping of a child's self-concept (Hamachek, 1971). A classroom atmosphere can be conducive to developing favorable self-images in students (Purkey, 1970). A classroom atmosphere involves the comments and actions of the children as well as those of the teacher. Since it is not likely that a classroom of children will be naturally warm and accepting toward all individuals, you will need to lead your pupils toward an atmosphere that is conducive to developing positive self-concepts.

Building Global Self-Concepts

Acceptance

Guiding children so they will accept the weaknesses and mistakes of others is a difficult and arduous task. A child with reading disabilities is often the recipient of ridicule. A teacher may foster peer acceptance in at least two ways.

First, you must be accepting of weaknesses and mistakes yourself, even with those children who do not always behave in a manner that you naturally find acceptable. Your degree of acceptance will be clearly visible in the comments you make to individuals about their work and behaviors, in your reaction to accidents, in the approaches you use with discipline problems, and in the amount of patience you demonstrate. If your comments about pupil products are mainly positive, if your correction of behavior is aimed at the specific act rather than the total child, if you remain calm after classroom accidents, if you expect children to be learners rather than experts, acceptance will be a natural element in your classroom.

Second, you need to offer positive reinforcement to children who make positive comments about others. There is no more appropriate place for praise than with the child who expresses acceptance of others' errors or low abilities.

Negative Comments

Guide children so they reduce negative comments or actions toward others. Any typical classroom is filled with many negative

comments directed toward individuals and a large percentage of these comments originate with the teacher. If you are accepting, your own negative comments will decline as will those of the children who take their behavior cues from you. When children do ridicule, criticize, or act negatively toward others, a group discussion about the universally human quality of imperfection sometimes can be helpful. One approach is to begin such a discussion by relating an episode indicating a weakness in the life of a famous person, then leading into a discussion of the fact that everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and finally focusing on the specific behavior to be eliminated. (It may be very beneficial to include your own weaknesses and errors in the discussion.)

In addition, be very careful that you do not unconsciously reward negative comments. Many children receive the additional attention they desire when their teachers make frequent public note of negative interactions. Attempt to redirect the children's methods of seeking attention, rather than rewarding them by taking the time to correct them in front of their peers. When it is necessary to help children overcome their negative actions, talk with them or correct them in private.

Tattling

Help children develop a discriminating attitude toward tattling. To encourage the reporting of others' behaviors may lead to an unmanageable situation as well as violate the suggestions just made concerning negative comments. On the other hand, banning all tattling closes doors to children who at times may need your help. The development, instead, of pupil ability to discriminate the significant from the trivial can lead to a happy balance between the two extremes. A great deal of your patience will be required to develop such traits, for you will need to listen to each pupil report before you can help the informers decide whether their information is important. By giving positive reactions to the types of reports you wish to condone and negative but understanding reactions to those you wish to eliminate, you should be able to develop discriminating abilities. For example, when a significant incident is reported, an appropriate comment might be, "Thank you for telling me. I'm happy that you know when to tell me about other children." When a trivial incident is reported, an appropriate comment might be, "Do you think this is something you should have told me or could you have handled this better yourself?" Of course, you will need to be consistent in the types of reports you accept and reject.

Embarrassment

Avoid embarrassment as a punishment. Almost certainly there will be behaviors within your classroom that you will want to control or eliminate. But of all the classroom control devices from which you can choose, one of the poorest alternatives is embarrassment. It may be effective, but it can crush the individual's self-concept. If your classroom has a positive atmosphere, correction in private can be just as effective and much less damaging. Enhancing and maintaining self-attitudes, while modifying unwanted behaviors, are keys to positive disciplines (Reynolds, 1980).

Building Reading Self-Concepts

Reading Groups

Minimize the difference between reading groups. Enough evidence has been gathered to establish the fact that reading ability differences cannot be completely disguised from children. When groups are formed on the basis of reading ability, children are aware of the status of their group. This point does not necessarily indicate that grouping according to reading ability for part of the instruction is bad. The damage to self-concept that frequently accompanies ability grouping is not produced so much by children's knowledge of their group's status as it is by the manner in which the teacher treats the groups. Children should be made to see that high levels of reading skill are not essential to their acceptability as worthwhile human beings. They should be able to avoid branding themselves as permanent members of a low-ability group. Progress toward this goal can be achieved in two ways.

First, avoid comparisons and competition among groups. Do not threaten children that you will move them "down" to another group or promise that you will move them "up." Do not discuss how far ahead one group is from another. Reject comments from children that any group is fast/slow, good/bad, ahead/behind. Give the impression that you accept all groups equally.

Second, vary the bases on which groups are formed. If children are not always in the same group, they will be less tempted to brand themselves as members of that group. Groups can be based on an interest area or on a specific need as well as on general reading levels.

Interest area groups are formed when several children have independently read books on the same topic or when they desire to work together on a common interest task involving reading. The purpose of the group is to give children an opportunity to share their readings, so

little actual instruction is needed. The group exists only long enough to meet this purpose, usually for one or two sessions.

Specific needs groups are formed when several children, regardless of their ability or group membership, demonstrate a similar reading weakness or need. Since the purpose of the group is to develop a specific skill, the group exists only until that skill is mastered.

The groups should provide every poor reader some opportunity to associate with recognized good readers. It may be advisable at times to form groups arbitrarily. If you feel the need to have basic groups formed around general reading levels, do not overlook the value in frequent use of these other groupings so that ability differences may be deemphasized.

Comparing Progress

Compare the reading progress of an individual with his/her own previous work rather than with that of other pupils. Certainly you already avoid statements such as, "Mark, your work is the poorest in the class." You convey the same message, however, when you consistently exclude Mark from positive comparisons made with other children. Avoidance of all comparisons can be harmful to pupils with high self-concepts if they train them to find success only in terms of comparisons with others. The practice is especially harmful to the child who, when compared, is always found wanting.

Comparisons are not always limited to comments. Many teachers like to keep public records of the books read independently by the children. These records may take the form of rockets aimed for a moon, cars on a race track, apples on a tree, or other similar devices. This practice compares children's abilities as surely as verbal comments. Any practice that relies on comparisons for its success is bound to be destructive of self-concept for the child who consistently compares unfavorably.

In contrast, when individuals compare their own progress over a period of time, the results can be healthy. This type of comparison can be achieved when children keep private records of books read, skills mastered, or words learned. Comparisons of progress are enhanced even more when the teacher establishes realistic, daily goals for successful achievement (Artley, 1977). Students and teacher together can then check off goals that have been attained, thereby helping to reinforce feelings of success and progress. Keeping records of workbook or worksheet scores will not seem to demonstrate the same

progress to children because the material continually deals with new content. Even though progress is made, scores appear as if they remain constant. Another fruitful self-comparison is accomplished when children read the same passage orally into a tape recorder at several points during the school year and listen to the improvements. An examination of child's reading ability at several points during the school year is likely to reveal some progress, thereby improving self-concept.

If you are in a school situation where you are allowed to make report card comparisons a matter of individual progress, such a practice will also aid in the development of a positive classroom atmosphere. It is possible to avoid certain end-of-term setbacks if traditional report cards, based on comparisons with the class, can be eliminated.

The more important the opinions of peers are to a child, the more important a positive classroom atmosphere is to healthy self-concept development. Ideas for structuring a classroom in a positive way can be found elsewhere (Quandt, 1983).

Making Children Feel That You Accept Them

While it is very important that children perceive an air of acceptance in their classroom in general, of equal importance are their feelings of being accepted by their teacher. A number of studies have shown that a definite relationship exists between teacher attitude toward a child, especially as perceived by the pupil, and pupil self-concept (Purkey, 1970). This relationship is influenced by the teacher's own self-perceptions. Teachers with low self-esteem were found to generate feelings of inadequacy in their classrooms (Edeburn & Landry, 1976). Although the teacher's influence wanes as the child grows older, it does not cease by the end of the elementary school years. The teacher is one of the important persons (significant others) whose opinions the child values, so it is important that the pupil feel accepted by the teacher. One of the best ways to accomplish this goal is to share interests.

Using Children's Interests

A few children apparently have bland backgrounds and have never developed strong interests. However, these children appear to be the exception rather than the rule, and teachers usually are able to provide even these students with enough experiences to develop interests which can be utilized in classroom planning.

Capitalizing on any of their interests can do much for making children feel that you accept them. Children select their own interests;

interests which become a part of them. When children see that you accept their interests, it adds to their feelings of acceptance.

Determining Interests

Obviously, the first step in using a child's interests is to determine what they are. One common method for discovering interests is the recording of books read over a period of time and the search of these records for interest patterns. Since, the type of child whose self-concept has had a debilitating effect upon reading is being discussed, it is unlikely the child will have engaged in much independent reading. Other techniques will need to be developed to determine interests.

Individual pupil-teacher conferences can supply a great deal of information. During conferences, children can openly discuss what they like to do as well as what they would like to read or have read to them. The conference also can be used to plan future learning activities. Wirth (1977) suggests that, in order to enhance self-concept, children should become partners in determining how, when, and what they learn.

In addition, observations of the child's free time activities and interests expressed during spontaneous pupil-teacher conversations will add to your knowledge. The assumption is made that children will engage in and discuss those activities that interest them the most. Much of your observation could be done at the same time as the diagnostic observations described earlier. A notebook with a page for notes on each child is one excellent way to accumulate your observations.

Using Interests

After interests have been determined, you can proceed with capitalizing upon them. One application of the child's interests deals with selecting materials to read to the class. Children of all ages enjoy having stories or other material read to them. At times you may select material to read that you enjoy or that you wish the children to hear for its literary value. At other times, though, you can choose materials to read that deal with a specific child's interests. Of top priority in your selection of materials should be the interests of the child suffering from a poor self-concept. If children can see that their interest areas are important to you, they are more likely to feel important. Such activity may even spur children to attempt reading about their interests, an action which offers much potential success due to high motivation.

Displaying books and materials that deal with the children's interests is another method of making students' interests appear important. Displaying books attractively in the classroom library area

is a good year long practice for motivating children to read independently. When children see books in their areas of interest on display, there is the added benefit of making students feel their interests are accepted.

Very often children become so interested in a topic that they develop into junior experts. When this phenomenon occurs with low self-concept children, you are offered a good opportunity to make them feel accepted. Plan your lessons carefully so that the topic of interest becomes pertinent to some area of your curriculum. Arrange to have the children share their knowledge with the class. While there is value in calling on individuals for information on a number of spontaneous occasions, planning with the children about how they might present and illustrate their topic is more likely to make them feel successful. You can improve the acceptance given children by the class if you introduce the student's expertise to the class prior to the presentation. The wonderful effect that the sudden role as an authority can have upon children's self-concept makes rearranging your teaching schedule to include the topic worthwhile. If the topic cannot be placed in a natural part of your curriculum, give the child separate time for the presentation.

The creation of reading groups based on common interests can also add to the importance placed on children's interests. In such groups, the children can read to one another from materials dealing with their topic; they can share what they have already read; or they can plan how to present their topic to the class. The grouping itself may also be helpful. Beane et al. (1980) suggest self-concept can be affected by a democratic classroom climate, characterized by a variety of grouping patterns.

Using Children's Writings

Just as interest can be used to make children feel accepted, products of their creativity can serve the same purpose. When children are given the opportunity to be truly creative about their writings and they know they have put effort into the writings, children are likely to identify with them whether they do their own writing or dictate ideas to the teacher who writes them on a language experience chart. As with interests, if you accept and regard with importance the children's creative writings, their chances of accepting themselves and feeling important will be enhanced. Three steps are involved in displaying your acceptance of children's writing products.

1. Allow individuals to present to the class what they have written or you have written for them. Children should not be

forced to read their writing products; to do so would destroy all of the motivational advantages offered by the use of their language. Volunteers should be easy to find because even problem readers generally are able to read their own products.

2. Display enthusiasm for the writings read by making it very clear that you are listening to and appreciating what is being read. Following each individual's reading there must be positive reinforcement from you. Certainly, there will be some positive comments you can make about any writings. Unless a product is actually outstanding, limit the praise to the specific areas that are best or where progress has been made. If time after time you tell the children their papers are "good," such praise becomes routine and appears insincere. Recognition of specific qualities provides models for all children to follow in seeking your approval, yet keeps the praise meaningful throughout the year. The first few times this procedure is carried out, it is especially vital that you meet the writings with favorable reactions and much enthusiasm.
3. If your favorable reactions are counteracted with negative comments from the reader's peers, little progress will be achieved. It is important for the children to learn to react in a positive manner, also. In order to achieve this state, it may be necessary to enforce a "positive comments only" rule during discussion of individual writing products. If you reinforce the positive comments that children make with positive comments of your own, enforcement can be quickly replaced with natural reactions. Children can be spurred to find good qualities about a writing product as readily as they can to find faults.

Many teachers feel they need to point out errors and weaknesses in the products of children. This "constructive criticism" is supposed to keep children from developing an attitude that any quality of work is acceptable and from a belief that no effort is needed. Children who have strong self-concepts and confidence in their language can, perhaps, profit from such criticism, but children who have poor self-concepts suffer from it. Praise of the specific qualities that you wish to develop, when they appear in student products, is much more effective. If the qualities you wish to develop never appear in student products and you

feel you must help a child recognize a problem area, use a "This is how you can make it even better" approach.

When children see that you are looking for good qualities in their products rather than poor, they are apt to put more effort into their writings. This reaction will, in turn, increase identification with the products. The child with the low self-concept will, consequently, be helped when these products are accepted.

USING THE CHILD'S VOLUNTEER READING

Content area education has largely moved away from an oral reading "round robin" type of textbook instruction. Yet, many classroom teachers use volunteer oral reading in various parts of the curriculum in order to assess students' strengths and weaknesses (Cunningham, 1982). Reading self-concepts can be raised through the proper handling of such occasions in much the same way that global concepts can be aided by creative products.

Damage can result when teachers require oral reading and call on volunteer readers, but then avoid the faltering reader who seems to waste so much time. In addition to the questionable value of this practice for content learning, repeated avoidance of the child can reinforce a negative self-concept.

In contrast, you can improve children's self-concepts if you offer them the opportunity to read before their peers and then accept the results. Of course, if the result is an obvious failure, your acceptance will appear to be a fake. To avoid this dilemma, carefully match both the difficulty and the length of the passage to be read with the ability of the reader. If the reading instructional materials match the children's abilities, this task will be relatively easy during reading lessons. For content area oral reading, however, careful planning will be necessary. If a single text is being used for all children, material to be read must be scrutinized in advance so that short passages with no difficult vocabulary can be reserved for children with low self-concepts. If a number of resources are being used in a given content area, children should be guided into pertinent material at an appropriate reading level so that any volunteer oral reading will be successful. Sometimes, in fact, children should be given opportunities to practice their paragraphs or passages in private so they will be able to read well orally.

Children reading at a level below the majority of their peers should have oral reading opportunities as frequently as the more skilled readers. Of most importance, however, is your acceptance of the child's performance on completion of the oral reading.

Of course, the question may arise, "How can I get the low self-concept child to volunteer?" While no procedure can be guaranteed, you will find an increased number of volunteers as the children learn they can receive recognition and acceptance with their oral reading.

Providing the Child with Feelings of Success

While some children apparently thrive on challenge, other children function best when they are quite certain they will succeed (Maehr, 1969). Children who have experienced few successes and have a related low self-concept are the ones who profit most from guaranteed success, i.e., activities that are geared at a level simple enough to virtually guarantee their satisfactory completion. After reviewing the related research, Purkey concluded: "Perhaps the single most important step that teachers can take in the classroom is to provide an educational atmosphere of success rather than failure" (1970, p. 55).

Most classroom situations provide a number of opportunities for child success. The following suggestions are designed to assist you in recognizing and using such opportunities.

Establishing Priorities

Prescriptive or diagnostic teaching may suggest that the teacher's role in dealing with disabled readers is to provide them with the skills they are missing. Many teachers have failed in their efforts to improve reading ability in this manner, however, and much of the failure may be associated with the neglect of the affective domain (Combs, 1982).

When the child's self-concept has a debilitating effect upon reading, work on reading skills alone will be fruitless. When self-concept is so negative that the pupil expresses no desire for ever learning to read, it makes more sense to build the self-concept before attempting to correct the reading. Beane (1982) urges that affective attention and the improvement of self-esteem should permeate the whole curriculum at all grade levels. Many teachers will find this suggestion less than practical, but when working with problem readers the main emphasis should be on success. Of course, it may be possible to work on both aspects simultaneously, but success should never be forfeited for skills needs in the beginning of the program.

If, in fact, the child has already received instruction in the weak skills areas in lower grades without success, there is considerable doubt that reteaching the same content with the same basic approach will produce success. Another encounter with failure can only serve to confirm the poor self-concept that the child already has.

It may be wise, therefore, to begin the program for improving self-concept with content in which the child already has some skills or ability rather than content in which the pupil has none. Rieger (1975)

feels this is particularly true for older children who have experienced school failure and who need proof that they are capable of doing regular classwork. This recommendation does not mean routine and dull drill of skills already learned; it suggests meaningful instruction within the child's strong areas. For example, if a child already has grasped the relationship between consonant letters and sounds but has few of the skills considered more advanced, consonants could be studied first. Instead of subjecting children to needless consonant lessons and worksheets, however, you could have them construct charts, posters, or transparencies that illustrate consonant pronunciations. Or you could plan with the children how they might instruct other children in this area.

Oral language is one strength which all children bring to school. Linguists report that even the less able children having amazing mastery of their oral language by age six. One motivating method of applying this strength to reading instruction is the language experience approach. The approach can be used as a total reading program, as an introductory device, or as a supplement to another approach. Hall (1981) has explained concisely and thoroughly how to implement this approach in a classroom setting. As children recognize and read back their own language from an experience chart, their concepts of themselves as readers are greatly improved.

Once self-concept is improved, as indicated by the same types of diagnosis as discussed earlier, work can continue with needed skills. No dramatic shift from strong areas to weak areas is necessary. The children can begin applying their strengths to unknown areas gradually, and instruction can shift slowly. The language experience approach is a very useful tool in this transition since needed skills instruction also can be based on the language charts.

The question may arise, "What can I do with these children who may be almost nonreaders while I am giving reading instruction to the other children in my classroom?" The ideal answer is "activities that require little reading skill and yet build self-concept." The ideal may not always be available, but activities such as the following offer a starting point.

1. Prepare and assemble bulletin board displays. (The titles and labels encourage some reading but do not place impossible demands upon children.)
2. Develop and stage a puppet show. (No reading is required, but oral language ability can be developed and self-expression can be enhanced.)

3. Gather books, materials, and filmstrips for a project or some other specific purpose. (The only reading required is that of titles or indexes, but library exploration is made purposeful.)
4. Find articles dealing with a specific topic or articles of various types; construct a newspaper scrapbook or display. (Children need not read the articles; titles alone will supply most of the information needed to construct this project.)
5. Take an imaginary shopping trip through the ads in a newspaper; come as close as possible to spending a certain number of dollars; clip out the ads to show the accumulated spending. (The only reading required is the name of the item and the price; success at spending the "correct" amount of money is likely.)
6. Plan and give a room TV program. (No reading is required, but some is encouraged; the value of the project depends upon the type of program presented.)
7. Read a high interest, low vocabulary book that has not previously been read. (It is assumed that at least early first grade vocabulary can be read successfully.)
8. Use language experience charts for any of a host of follow-up activities, including illustrating a group chart, constructing word banks, using words from charts for flash card games, rearranging words from charts into new sentences or stories, sharing individual language charts with others, finding words with common phonic elements, or classifying words. (Some reading is required, but it is the children's language.)

These activities are designed to gradually move low self-concept children into reading instruction by concentrating on strengths and by guaranteeing success. It should be noted that most of the suggestions require a degree of freedom within the classroom. It would be difficult to develop appropriate activities in a classroom where children are always quiet and are always in their seats.

Using Appropriate Materials

After the low self-concept child has been gradually shifted into prescriptive instruction, success must continue. An important factor in this continued success is the manner in which reading materials are used. Sanacore (1975) explains how the use of appropriate materials and the organization of materials so they are accessible to children enhances the self-concept. Individual pupil-teacher conferences can be used to discuss reading experience and to help the child see how the step by step progress through the materials is leading to reading success.

The publication of high interest, low vocabulary reading materials has opened the doors to this kind of success. Literally hundreds of such books and materials are available, and include virtually every combination of interest and reading level. In addition to stories written about topics of interest to appropriate ages, these materials usually have the advantage of an equally appropriate format. High interest, low vocabulary materials are used for the comprehension portion of the reading program. Lessons can be developed in much the same manner as developmental reading activities are developed from basal reader stories, except that less teacher guidance will be available from a teacher's manual.

Another alternative that allows the child to be successful with reading materials is the continuation of language experiences even after prescriptive skills teaching begins. In this type of program the teacher guides the class, group, or individual through an appealing activity. The activity is followed by oral language; i.e., by a discussion that is thorough enough to allow all interested individuals to contribute. Finally, a language experience chart is made using the children's exact language. Follow-up activities include rereading on several successive days, discussing new ideas, building word analysis lessons on words from the language charts, constructing word blanks, and using the independent activities listed earlier. Language experience charts usually can be read successfully because children identify with and recognize their own language. Eventually, children learn to read books, but children who have learned a concept of themselves as readers will begin to read books on their own with ease when guided to appealing stories.

Even basal readers or similar materials sometimes can be used to give the child success if handled with specific goals in mind. Instead of "covering the book," devote generous amounts of time to a few carefully selected stories which are interesting and are not overburdened with difficult concepts. Adequate time should go into the preparation for the stories so that the children can relate to them. Recent schema theory suggests that the building of concepts is crucial in developing reading ability (Rumelhart, 1982).

Computer technology offers still another alternative in selecting appropriate materials. With its branching programs and instant feedback, a computer can go beyond the normal classroom capability in giving the learner the right pace and level for reading. Caution must be used, however, for none of this is important if the program doesn't fit the child's needs. Software titles and descriptions are sometimes misleading, so teachers must select with care.

Making Success Public

So many of the failures of low self-concept children appear in public that it is important that the teacher assure that even minor successes be noticed by the class. Since many of the children's self-concepts are related to their view of how others see them, it is important that their peers become aware of their successes. In addition to the suggestions made in connection with creative writing and oral reading, methods for making successes public include calling on children for answers which you are sure they know and asking them to perform tasks in front of the class when you feel certain that those asked will complete the tasks correctly. Such tasks might include setting up science experiments, locating positions on a map, doing a chalkboard or chart-matching exercise, or performing any other activity you know the child is able to do.

Putting Failures in Perspective

In spite of all your efforts, all children are bound to experience some failures from time to time. But children, especially when they are very young, sometimes overemphasize the importance of their failures. In particular, beginning readers who fail to learn a number of sight words or a phonic principle sometimes confuse these specific learning gaps with failure in learning to read. If ignored by the teacher, this conviction of failure can lead to a poor reading self-concept which will set off the self-concept/reading cycle discussed earlier.

A few preventive measures during these beginning stages could possibly allow a child to avoid a lifetime of reading inability. This, again, would be an excellent opportunity for a pupil-teacher conference. Sitting down with the children who are confused about their specific failures and discussing their situations may be all that is needed. When children understand their situations, the specific problems also may be solved more easily, especially if individual help is provided. Perhaps repeated conferences may be necessary to convince some children that they are not failing.

Grading

A letter or numerical grade on a written task, after an oral presentation, or on a report card is an announcement of some degree of success or failure. If all grades were indications of success, they might become harmless; but they would also become meaningless. For the sake of self-concept, then, it would seem advisable to discard grades and grading. You may not find this a very practical suggestion if your school

policy requires grades. Even if you are obligated to assign traditional grades on traditional report cards, you are probably the one who decides what to write on the papers your children submit. Little or no value is achieved by placing grades on the reading activities the children complete, especially for the child who desperately needs success. It may be argued that children have a right to know how well they perform on a task, but this practice does not dictate the announcement of grades or any negative descriptors. Neither feedback to the pupils nor evaluations should be confused with grading; however, if necessary, it is better that children with low self-concepts be excluded from exacting feedback than that they receive a steady diet of failure. Perhaps such an approach will need to be explained to some parents. Once they understand the rationale, they can help extend the positive reinforcement into the home.

Encouraging a Positive Environment in the Home

Obviously, most of your influence over children's self-concepts ends when they leave the school building. But many parents are eager to help, and there are certain steps you can take to broaden the child's positive environment.

Information is one of the most important things the teacher can give the parents. Rosenthal (1977) found that parents who appear to have knowledge and sensitivity of problems associated with reading failure tended to develop greater self-concept in their children than parents who were relatively uninformed. Information about the nature of self-concept also can be beneficial to parents.

Group meetings with parents or school-home cooperative programs can be useful to explain the nature of self-concept and the value of using positive approaches at home. Typical child development at the given age level, normal behavior deviations, and effective parent-child relationships also can be explained. These types of descriptions are logical responses to parents who inquire about how to help at home. However, as indicated, the most successful results are achieved when the expectations and evaluations of parents toward their own child are realistically increased. Many schools see the value of scheduled parent-teacher conferences. The content of these conferences must be positive. Little value will result from lecturing parents about the negative attitudes they may be displaying toward their child. Instead, parents must be shown the positive side of their child. If the parents' expectations are too low, which is commonly the case, attempt to convince them that their child has potential and real ability. If

demanding parents have overexpectations for their child, show them the areas in which the child is already putting forth effort and is succeeding. Very often parent-teacher conferences concentrate on the problems of the child; suffice it to say that little positive self-concept is developed as a result of negative discussions.

Not all of the suggestions offered in this paper can be applied to every low self-concept child. However, you, the elementary teacher, can probably select a sufficient number to begin a thorough and concentrated program that will build the self-concept toward better reading.

CONCLUSION

How far can good self-concepts take you as you attempt to give every child the right to read? Can all children with reading difficulties be helped by improving their self-concepts? Should self-concept building become a standard part of the curriculum? These questions have not yet been answered. Sufficient evidence has been found, however, and enough support from authorities in education and psychology has been accumulated to suggest that many disabled readers can be helped by improving their self-concepts. As Combs (1982) stated, "An educational system that rules out feeling and emotion guarantees ineffectiveness." The importance of self-concept in learning to read must not only be recognized, it must be demonstrated in the classroom.

While a good self-concept appears to be vital for everyone, this paper has concentrated on the child with a poor self-concept and low reading ability. Four types of conditions have been suggested for improving self-concepts and thereby improving reading ability: establishing a positive atmosphere in the classroom, making children feel accepted, providing children with success, and encouraging a positive environment at home. The success and acceptance built into these conditions are the best devices known for improving self-concepts. But it must be remembered, success and acceptance are not products of a set of materials or of a program or of a classroom organization; they are products of the most influential factor in all teaching—you, the teacher.

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Appendix

Self-Concept Instruments

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. S. Coopersmith, *Antecedents of Self-Esteem*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1967.

Inferred Self-Concept Scale. E.L. McDaniel, Western Psychological Services, 1973.

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